

**QUOTE ABOUT HOW FAITH IN RELIGION SHOULD BE EXCLUDED FROM PUBLIC LIFE**

Thomas Jefferson, 1743 to 1826, "Religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God - he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship".

Comment: But religion is about you accounting for your belief to others in the religion whose job it is to help you believe the message! Religion is a unit and not just a collection of islands! And if your faith in God makes you complacent towards others or towards truth people have the right to reprimand you! And worship is not just what a believer does now and again. The believer offers all her works as worship which is why a Catholic bookkeeper who does his job without mentioning religion is still acting religion for he has consecrated what he does.

The other problem is how Christianity has one big difference from every other religion. It claims to be an intimate spiritual union where everybody is invisibly connected to everybody else and which is caused by Jesus personally living in and through his people so that they are his body. Islam as a community formed of individuals can say that the sins of some do not reflect on it as a whole for the community links don't forge a total unity or unification. The hand that kills makes the rest of the body suffer. As a whole you will suffer. So in Christianity the evil done by one does and must reflect on the whole.

"I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do to their fellows, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires" Susan Brownell Anthony, 1820 - 1906.

Comment: Does she mean that people are using God and religion to get you to do what they want? Yes. But do not forget that faith in God or religion is like a thing. People can be used by things and their own faith can use them. If faith is about manipulating others then it is bad. If faith risks being a thing that manipulates you it is bad too. The risk is not worth it and the benefits might not be benefits at all when the chickens are counted. Also, if you are using God to attract people to become what you want them to be that is a problem. Whether you aspire to see them become civilised and kind or something sinister you are still manipulating them. The manipulation in both cases is still bad. It is because it is bad that it could lead to something sinister. It is bad in itself and what it could be is an extra problem. It is only by luck if you are not drawing them into religious based evil-doing. Your faith remains unworthy of glory and praise. God is still a mask for your desires and ambitions and your worship is arrogant. You make it about you when you pretend you don't.

**APPENDIX FROM THE GIFFORD LECTURES, BRAND BLANSHARD**

**ARE OUR BELIEFS OUR OWN CONCERN ONLY?**

...since the beliefs we form in the privacy of our own minds make no difference to others either for help or for harm, they are no one's concern but our own, and we may indulge in them or not as we please. There are two distinct questions here, the question of our duty and the question of society's right.

Are our beliefs of enough social importance to make our habits in regard to them a matter of moral concern? If a choice or belief makes no difference to anyone in the way of good or evil, it does not seem to be of moral moment. If there are two paths to one's office of a morning, and the consequences of taking them are exactly the same, no moral choice is involved. Is it not similarly true of beliefs that they tip no balances of good or evil and hence are without moral complexion?

No, it is not. To be sure, when we call to mind some routine act of assent, particularly if it is in agreement with what everyone believes, we may be unable to see that it has made any difference anywhere, and probably it has in fact made little. But one must be wary here. Though the difference made by a belief is often of an impalpable kind, consisting in the confirmation or weakening of general habits of belief, still the fabric of belief in which we live is sustained or dissolved by such acts of acceptance or dissent. This fabric, as a whole, is of vast importance; it determines the cultural level of the community. Every community has a Weltanschauung, a system of beliefs which cover all the main problems of life, and constitute the common sense of that community. Many of these beliefs are universal and incorrigible, since experience forces them on all alike—beliefs about the value of food and drink and the care of children, beliefs about the number and the round of the seasons, about the uses of fire and water. But when communities go beyond these elementary beliefs, they tend to fabricate worlds of their own. Socially, the Indian Brahmin lives in a different world from that of the Nebraska farmer; religiously, the Burmese Buddhist lives in a different world from that of the Mussulman in Bagdad or the Catholic in Madrid. Scientifically, an Eskimo village lives in a different world from that of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. To each of these parties, their own world seems the only real one, to which any fundamental challenge seems merely absurd. Most men live like raisins in what Bagehot called a cake of custom.

Now, some of these intellectual worlds are far more advanced, and more rapidly advancing, than others. It is perhaps dangerous, if there are anthropologists about, to assert that anything is really better than anything else, but they might do well to investigate whether this doubt or denial is not part of their own cake of custom. At any rate, I shall be so rash as to suggest that the intellectual world of, say, the London Athenaeum is a better world than that of a headhunting council in Borneo, in the sense that it is richer in scope and more accurate in its reflection of fact.

How has it come to be so? Part of the answer, certainly, is that whereas among backward people the fabric of belief and custom tends to be so rigid as to keep the individual mind fixed like a fly in amber, in a group that is progressive the medium is kept from solidifying by the constant beating of small individual wings. Indeed, in some remarkable societies, like that of fourth-century Athens or of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, the free and critical exercise of mind has itself almost become one of the mores of the tribe. In such a society every man, as regards some part of his belief, is a member of 'his majesty's loyal opposition' and is not ostracised but respected for his dissent. Not, to be sure, that there is anything creditable in dissent as such. If that is not something to be condemned in itself, as it was among those ancient Locrians who, when a man proposed a change of laws in their assembly, kept a rope round his neck to swing him by if his proposal was rejected, neither is it a virtue, as it is for so many village atheists and for orators in Hyde Park. What is creditable and socially valuable is not the mere belief in this or that but the having arrived at it by a process which, had the evidence been different, would have carried one with equal readiness to a contrary belief.

Now, such a habit of mind is bound to come sooner or later into conflict with communal orthodoxy. Why so bound? Because, unhappily, much of the fabric of belief in which we live is almost certainly false. How do we know this? By reflecting that the intellectual worlds that modern communities live in are inconsistent with each other, and that where there is such disharmony there must be error on one side or the other. Whether the error lies with us, only reflection can reveal. Whether this reflection will go on freely and with common encouragement, or furtively and sluggishly, depends on whether the intellectual climate favours the critical use of one's mind. And in the end that climate depends on the multitude of little people like ourselves.

We all count in our various degrees. Some 'quarto and folio editions of mankind' have counted enormously; one need only refer to what Copernicus did to the older astronomy, what Darwin did to the older belief about human origins, or what Gandhi did to untouchability. In these cases, where a conspicuous lead was given, many promptly followed. But many did not, and it is instructive to consider why. The reason was not that the new belief was so difficult to understand, nor merely that vested interests were piled high on the other side; many who failed to follow would have profited by doing so. The root difficulty is the sheer inertia of human thought. It sometimes seems as if the pragmatists were right that men never reflect until there arises some block to their activity which forces them to it. In fact this is not true, for men do think at times from the sheer interest in knowing. Nevertheless, *denken ist schwer*; conformity is easy; even reformers with a clear case and the greatest courage commonly get their case accepted only when they themselves are memories. Beliefs that, attended to in detachment, are obvious, still have to fight their way against mountainous sluggishness, as we may see in the slow recognition of the rights of women and of the cultural irrelevance of one's colour.

Unhappily one cannot, by choosing, be a Darwin or a Gandhi. But one can at least resolve that one will not form part of the automatic resistance movement when some Darwin or Gandhi does appear. If people generally did that, if they reached the point where it was as much a matter of self-respect for them to have reasons for the faith that was in them and to be ashamed of being unreasonable and gullible as it now is to wear clothes that are in fashion and to have acceptable manners, civilisation would be transformed. What we believe is less important than its source in intellectual habit. Edward Caird used to say to his students that it was important that a belief should be true, and important that it should be reasoned, but it was more important that it be reasoned than that it be true. Beliefs that spring from reflection, even when false, have behind them the means of their own amendment.

## THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE: A CRUCIAL CASE

The two main objections to taking belief as a matter of morals, namely that it is involuntary and that it affects ourselves alone, appear to be unsound. But to some the conclusion may still seem paradoxical. 'People surely are not to be lauded or condemned for their beliefs,' it will be said. 'We may call their actions wrong because they produce evil effects or because they spring from evil motives. But a belief is not an action. One cannot say that it is duty to believe or disbelieve, or that a certain belief is one that a man has no moral right to entertain.'

But is this strictly true? Take a famous case. Many years ago in Spain there was a brilliant but modest and devout young man who, though the son of a distinguished house, gave up his worldly prospects to live a life of austere service in a Dominican convent. Being of great ability and earnestness, he was given increasingly large responsibilities, till at sixty-three he was made inquisitor-general for Spain and all her possessions. In the remaining years of his life this earnest and devoted man, whose name was Thomas Torquemada, put to death by fire some two thousand persons who could not believe as he did, many of them after prolonged torture. Was this wrong? Most of us would say that it was hideously and atrociously wrong.

But why precisely? When an act is set down as wrong, it is usually because of bad consequences or a bad motive. Suppose that in this case you fix upon the consequences, which included the excruciating suffering in mind and body of many good men and women. Torquemada would have admitted the suffering. But he would have pointed out that in his view the consequences included very much more; they included the cleansing from Spain of human plague—spots from which a pestilence was spreading, a pestilence that threatened to carry large numbers of persons to perdition and was averted cheaply by this relatively small number of deaths. So far as consequences were concerned, the balance was therefore good. As for motive, the highest of all motives is the sense of duty, and this Torquemada felt strongly. One may say that a human being should have some humanity as well as a sense of duty. He would probably reply, following Augustine, that he was doing a genuine kindness to the people he sent to the stake. If they continued heretics, they would suffer agonisingly and eternally in hell; so far they had resisted everything that might, by inducing them to recant, have prevented their going there; there was some chance that, if put on the pyre and burnt by a slow fire, as they not infrequently were to give more time to repent,<sup>1</sup> they would renounce their errors; and was not an hour or so of fire in this life a low price at which to purchase exemption from an eternity of fire hereafter?

This is a very strong case. Grant Torquemada his premises, and the conclusion follows irresistibly that torturing and burning people may be a duty and a kindness. You can hardly say he was a wicked man for living up more courageously than others to what he and they believed in common, or for acting sincerely in what he believed to be the interest of his victims. We cling, nevertheless, to our conviction that he did wrong, and atrocious wrong. And the question presses more urgently than before, where does the wrongness lie?

I see no escape from the answer that he had no right to believe what he did. That his action would cause excruciating suffering and death to many was certain; the belief on the strength of which he caused it no responsible mind has any right to call certain. We commonly say that if a man sincerely believes something he ought to live up to it, and we are following a false scent if we condemn him for loyalty to his convictions. But we may justly insist that if what he believes calls for torture and slaughter he should have excluded all possibility that he might be mistaken before applying the rack and the torch. We may concede that there is small harm in some beliefs, in the belief of a friend of mine, for example, that a minute shoe he once picked up in Ireland was a fairy's shoe. There may be no great harm even in believing, as another and kindly friend of mine did during the war, that all Germans should be exterminated, if the belief is held in the half—whimsical was which makes it inconceivable that it should ever be acted on. But as the evil entailed by holding a belief grows greater, so does the responsibility of holding it, and when that evil is overwhelming and unquestionable, the belief too must be unquestionable or the act is fiendish. 'After all,' as Montaigne said, 'it is rating one's conjectures at a very high price to roast a man alive on the strength of them'.

It is not good enough to plead that one is sincere in one's belief; there are some wrongs to mankind for which mere sincerity is a totally inadequate excuse. Torquemada was very probably sincere in his belief that heretics should be exterminated, just as Hitler may have been sincere in believing that Jews should be exterminated. But that does not make their beliefs the less mistaken or their victims the less dead. Sincerity and dutifulness only make wrong more inevitable when they are the tools of fanaticism; as Grattan said of intolerance, 'conscience, which restrains every other vice, becomes the prompter here'.

No doubt such fanaticism as this is more than merely intellectual error; one would probably find in such natures dark strains of hatred and sadism which predisposed them to their beliefs; and it may be said that their beliefs are the symptoms and rationalisation of evil tendencies which themselves are what we condemn. I am sure there is much truth in this. But there are many persons, after all, who feel such hatreds without acting on them; it was the belief that in these cases raised the floodgates, whereas a contrary belief would have kept the flood in. I am not questioning that the distortion of beliefs from some impulses is worse than from others; I am saying that where great human goods and ills are involved, the distortion of belief from any sort of avoidable cause is immoral, and the more immoral the greater the stakes.

We have probably said enough to make clear that belief and disbelief are matters of moral concern. We now turn to the more controverted question:

Granting that they are so, what is the rule that should guide us? It may seem at first glance that there is no problem here at all. 'Surely the only possible rule', one may say, 'is to believe what is true and disbelieve what is false'. And of course that would be the rule if we were in a position to know what was true and what false. But the whole difficulty arises from the fact that we do not and often cannot. What is to guide us then? Sometimes what seems to us true conflicts with what authority says is true; sometimes what the evidence suggests as true is something that will make ourselves and others very unhappy; sometimes on pressing issues the evidence is conflicting. In such cases what are we to believe?